

Speak Your Piece: Life in the Slow Lane

[Broadband and Tech](#)

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When it comes to creating a two-tiered system for some Internet content providers, Grandma had it right: Don't play favorites. Here's what "net neutrality" means to rural America.

[By Edyael Casaperalta](#)



Please don't break the Internet before rural America gets it.

The Wall Street Journal [reported](#) last week the Federal Communications Commission will consider "new rules on Internet traffic that would allow broadband providers to charge companies a premium for access to their fastest lanes."

The frenzy that followed about "net neutrality" forced FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler to issue a statement.

“There has been a great deal of misinformation” regarding the upcoming rule changes, he said. He assured the public that Internet service providers will have to act transparently, won’t be able to favor content from their affiliates, and that no content that is legal will be blocked. But until May 15 when the five FCC commissioners vote and the rules are released, the public will have to take his assurance on faith. Only after the vote will the FCC share the proposal and seek public comment.

So what does network neutrality mean for rural folk, whether online or trying to get online? What does it mean for rural businesses and the economy of rural areas? Network neutrality, or “net neutrality” for short, is the principle that the Internet is a neutral playing field where all information gets treated equally, no information gets preferential treatment and no player is blocked. As my grandma would say, “O todos coludos, o todos rabones,” which roughly translates to “Either we all wear tails, or we all get our tails cut.”

Net neutrality has made the Internet the next best thing since canned pickles. As it exists today, the Internet is the place where the Daily Yonder and the New York Times are equals. It’s where I can receive both of these publications with equal ease without having to pay an extra connection fee. The Daily Yonder and other small players don’t have to pay more to travel a faster lane. All wear tails or all get their tails cut.

As important as net neutrality is, we don’t hear a lot of rural voices in this debate. That’s because rural and Native communities constitute the majority of people who are unable to access telecommunications services. According to the latest FCC Broadband Progress Report, fixed broadband networks do not reach 19 million Americans. Of those unserved by fixed broadband networks, 14.5 million live in rural areas and nearly a third in tribal lands. These statistics reveal a persistent digital divide that keeps rural communities from better education and health care, economic development and full participation in our culture and democracy.

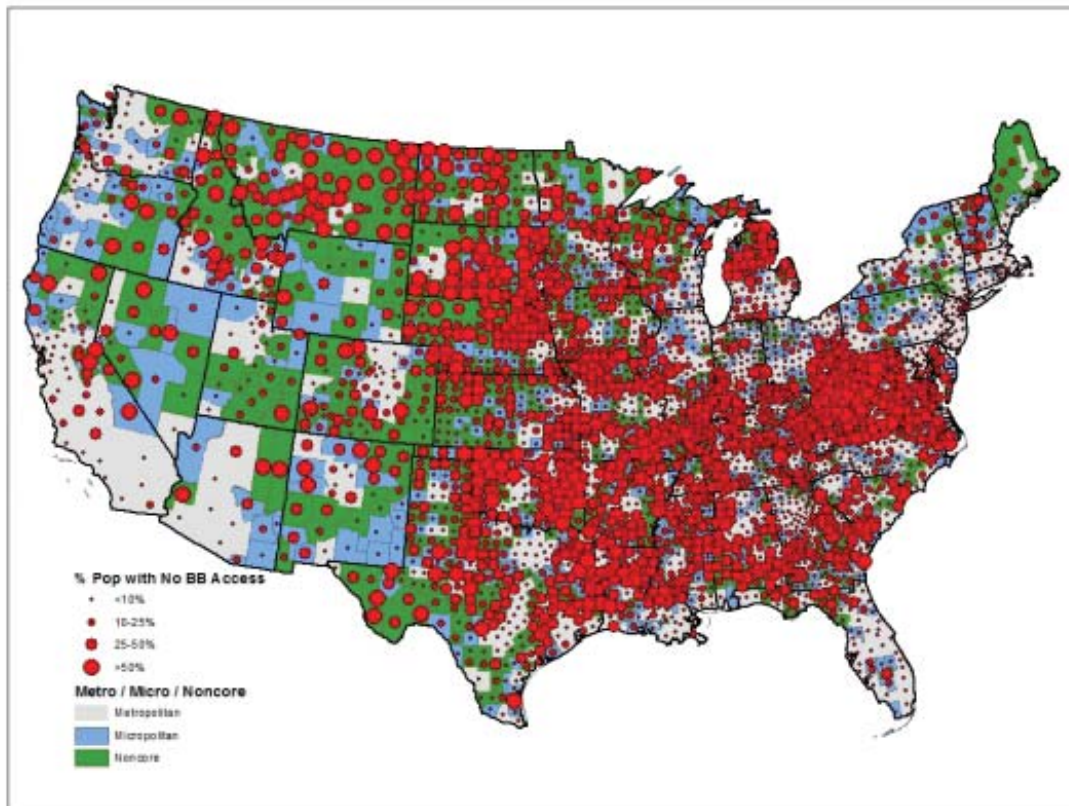
But even if you are on the wrong side of the digital divide, net neutrality affects you. Here are a few examples of how:

An Equal Voice

The Internet increases media access for marginalized voices. Rural areas generally have less access to all forms of media, not just the Internet. High barriers for entering traditional media businesses mean smaller voices get excluded. It is far more expensive to launch a radio or TV station than it is to launch a YouTube channel featuring rural music and videos. The Internet is a platform where rural people can speak for themselves and on behalf of their communities to wider audiences.

Net neutrality grants equal opportunity to every idea and helps ensure that rural communities do not experience the same lack of representation they have in other media platforms.

We already know the stereotyped images that traditional media use to portray rural America. Net neutrality ensures that the Internet is a better platform for rural people to create and share their own images.



Source: National Broadband Map Data aggregated to County Level, 2010 Map of Internet access. The size of the red dots indicates the percentage of a county's population that lacks wired broadband. The larger the dot, the greater the percentage of the population that lacks service. [Enlarge the map.](#)

Business Opportunities

Rural businesses can reach the entire world via the world wide web. I would like to see [Dale's Fried Pies](#), my friend's startup in Tennessee, reach customers in Australia as easily as [Sara Lees Desserts](#) does. But if Internet providers can charge Dale more to reach customers faster, then she will no longer have an equal footing. Sara Lee, a corporation, can afford higher fees. Dale, a real person, can't. Entrepreneurs and small businesses will be at a disadvantage. And that will hurt local economies.

Competitive Prices

Net neutrality encourages new businesses to enter the market. With more competitors in the field, consumers can hunt for lower prices. This is especially important for folks in rural areas, which typically enjoy fewer businesses competing for their patronage.

If net neutrality is weakened, businesses will accrue the expense of paying for a faster lane to reach customers. Over time, companies might pass that expense on to their customers, resulting in higher prices. The higher prices will generate more profits for major telecommunications corporations, which already charge us plenty to use the Internet. And companies paying for a faster lane to reach more customers will want to bypass rural communities, where fewer customers live.

Faster Speeds for All (Who Can Afford Them)

Last week the FCC also announced its proposal to increase the official broadband speed from 4 megabits download to 10 megabits. Technicalities aside, this translates to faster Internet. This is a great step! But there's a chance weaker net-neutrality rules will compromise the ability of rural communities to enjoy these faster speeds. What good are faster speeds if the information rural people want is stuck in the cheaper slow lane?



Photo

by [Kelsey Harrison](#) The FCC may be trying to keep delicious [Dale's Fried Pies](#) out of your hands.

The Solution

In its defense, the FCC claims that its hands are tied due to a Court of Appeals ruling saying that the FCC cannot legally establish rules that prevent Internet service providers from giving preferential treatment to companies that can pay for a faster lane. The FCC asked the public for comment on how to address this legal problem.

The way to solve this problem and, coincidentally, to close the digital divide, is to reclassify Internet service as a Title II service. Translation: The FCC should treat the Internet as a *common carrier* service like telephone. The change will allow the FCC to

regulate Internet providers so they don't behave badly in the first place, instead of waiting for them to misbehave and then taking corrective action. Reclassification allows the commission to enforce net neutrality and flat-out prohibit the creation of faster lanes. Reclassifying Internet under Title II would also mean that every person in our country would have the right to an Internet connection no matter where they live.

Whoa!

That means that an Internet provider could not cherry-pick areas to serve, which consistently leaves rural areas with bad or no service. Title II reclassification would give the FCC the legal authority to ensure that Internet providers put people, not just profits, into their equations.

So, please don't break the Internet before rural gets it. We don't want a hand-me-down Internet from our connected brothers and sisters. We deserve a new pair of jeans, Ma.

Stakeholders do not have to wait for the new rules to be publicly released to submit comments to the Open Internet docket at the FCC (GN Docket 14-28). You can file comments [here](#). As a response to the outcry of advocates, the FCC also created an inbox where people can email their comments, which may be an easier route for people with slow Internet connections. You can share your thoughts now by emailing openinternet@fcc.gov.

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